

Jens Ostergaard: from Trolley Tokens to Sea Shells; from Conductor to Instructor

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Destined to lead two very different lives. Jens Mathias Ostergaard (1878–1969) arrived in Honolulu on 27 May 1901 (fig. 1). A farm laborer, he had emigrated from Denmark when he was only 19, joining his older brother to work first in Iowa and then at a dairy ranch in Humboldt County in northwestern California. There (he wrote many years later) “the long cold and wet winters turned my thoughts to lands of the tropics with their warm climate and rich fauna and flora, such as I had . . . read about.”¹

“The youngest of six children—four girls and two boys,” he was born on the island of Mors in northern Jutland. He attended school only until he was 14. For the next five years he herded cattle. In those ten-hour long days there was little to observe except the flora, some of which was tantalizingly embedded in the peat bogs. The village teacher encouraged him to keep a notebook and to draw with water colors. His future marine interests may have been aroused not by an ocean but by fossil shells in a nearby quarry.²

It was as a laborer that he came alone to Honolulu from San Francisco. (Ships passenger manifests do not list him.) On that May date the *Hawaiian Star* and the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* each carried a half page display advertisement extolling the very new Mānoa Valley subdivision, “College Hills,” and promising a local trolley line by the next September. That promise was well kept.

Perhaps Jens, then 22, knew where he wanted to go. His first job was as a laborer in the dredging of Honolulu harbor.³ Here he began to collect shells. Then he worked for the Honolulu Dairymen’s Association and lived nearby on Sheridan Street (making his first appearance in the city directory).

Soon he was a conductor on the Mānoa Valley trolley. It ran on a short feeder line, using at first only one car with reversible seats.

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It rumbled along a round trip of 3.4 miles, from the transfer point at Punahou and Wilder Streets, steeply uphill to Kamehameha and O'ahu Avenues, and stopped at 'Ānuenue Street, near middle Mānoa. Fifteen minutes were allotted for each way, but the partly downhill trip could be made in five.⁴

A conductor wore a white cap and a khaki uniform, the coat trimmed with white braid (fig. 2).⁵ There, so nattily costumed, Jens would stay, melding into a neighborhood, all the rest of his youth and for the next 17 years, until at 42 he would be transmuted into a very different role, that of a university teacher of natural science, at the nearby University of Hawai'i.

Jens' formal education had ended with grammar school. Yet, like many Scandinavians, he had acquired some knowledge of other languages: his were German, French, English, and a little (mostly botanical) Latin.

His daily stint on the Mānoa trolley usually gave him turnaround time for a little reading. Often he read French novels, or studied YMCA lessons in grammar, math, and history. The new residents of College Hills were professionals, business executives, merchants, government officials, for in 1903 this new Mānoa subdivision was the alternative to Nu'uano valley for the aspiring middleclass. It was more select than in the lowlands, and here the children could walk to "Oahu College"—as their private school, Punahou, was then called. To these, a bookish conductor was an agreeable curiosity, a submerged illustration, at the least, of a European secondary education. They could not guess that he was self-educated.

Jens was no Viking. Spare and short, with a ruddy complexion and golden hair, he seemed elfish and fatherly to both children and adults. On this very local line he became a helping hand in a new and unique community of neighborliness and friendship. The trolley itself became an extension of the homes.

Mānoa could be rainy. Towngoers needed their umbrellas but only to get to and from the trolley, usually not thereafter. The umbrellas were safe all day long in the overhead rack. As an accommodation the cars twice a day brought the newsboys' bundles of papers up the hill; other small "freighting" was common.

The return route along O'ahu Avenue did a grand U-turn around the Atherton house (now the home of the University president) and rolled along a short segment of Kamehameha Avenue, still out of sight of the majority of the new homes on the long two blocks before the hill downwards. Jens clanged the bell so that the trolley would

not be a surprise. Sometimes ladies in their Edwardian garb would rush to the car before their back full of buttons could be fastened. Jens would complete the job. A lady lost her handkerchief; he stopped the car and retrieved it.

On the return trip there was little business at midday. In later years, when two cars alternated on the route, there was a switch or by-pass in front of the Schmidt house (at 2120 Kamehameha Avenue, between Beckwith and Liloa Rise). While waiting for the other car to pass, the motorman and the conductor might go around to the back of the house and enter to use the bathroom. In the early evening the trolley might pause after the long, grinding ascent of Punahou hill; there one could watch the tennis players whom one had brought home earlier.

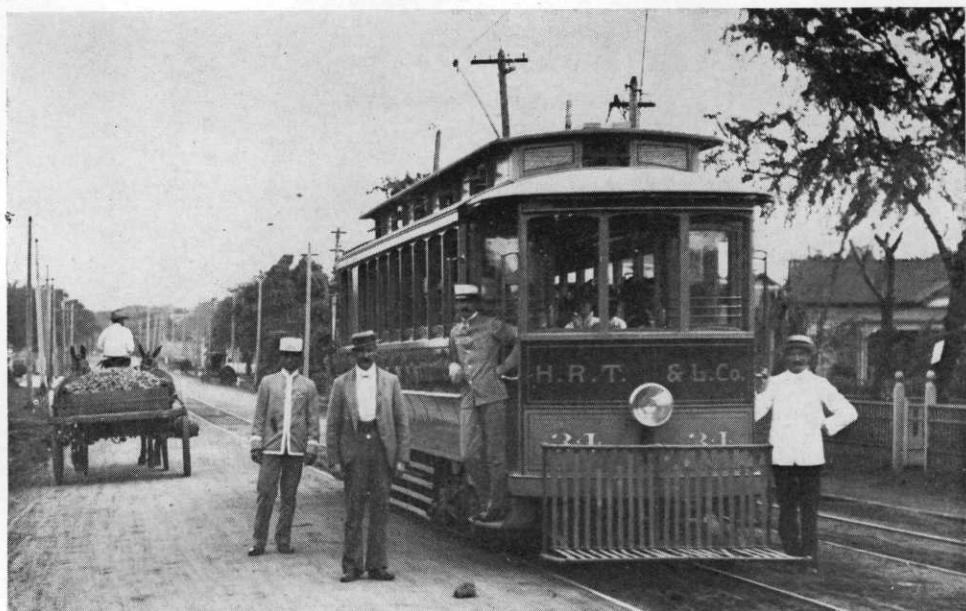
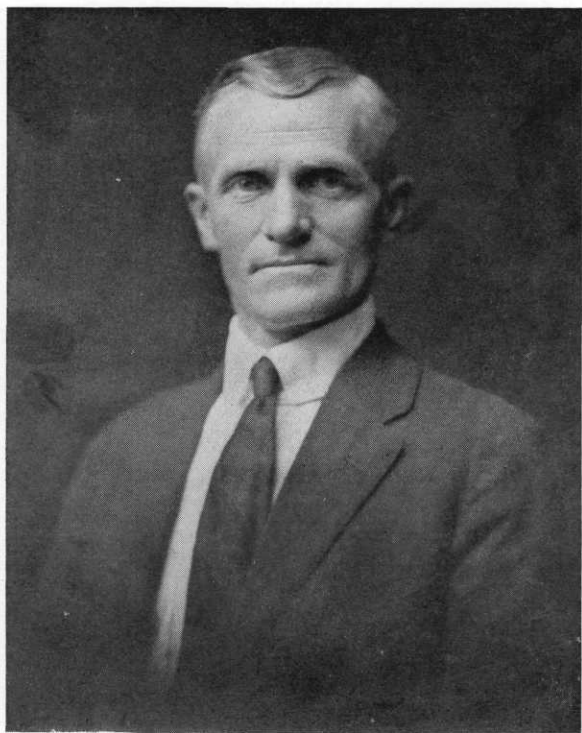
The dirt road of wide Kamehameha Avenue was a good space for baseball, with both first and third bases lying athwart the car tracks. In the late afternoon and evening the trolley would have to clang and clang, as though to shove the players off the diamond.

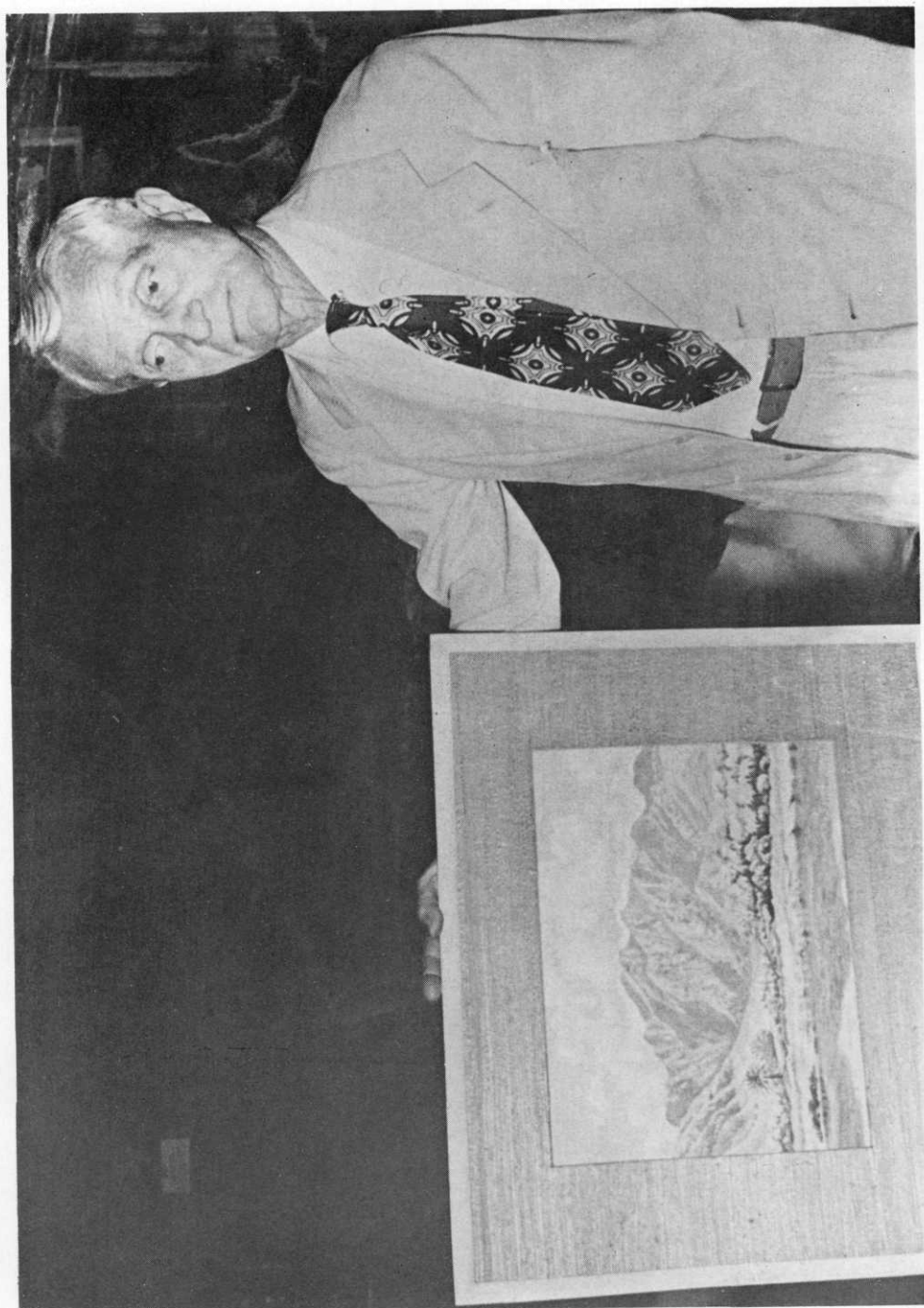
All was not so halcyon. High-spirited boys found the trolley a wondrous target for pranks. One could jump forth, pull the overhead contact trestle, and run and hide, then watch the conductor climb out and find the dangling rope and reset the power. Thus one accumulated youthful points. Pins and even pennies could be laid on the track for interesting flattening. A more vigorous prank was to lurk at the end of the line (near Cooper Road), where one could tie to the rear cow catcher a can partly filled with gasoline. It would spark and drip, burning fuel along O'ahu Avenue, effecting a satisfying sound and a pretty sight, indeed, in the evening. Halloween fiends often greased a few rails on the uphill tracks. Buckets of sand carried on the cars were a protection.⁶

During these years of light work and heavy reading, Jens boarded variously in the environs of downtown, moving almost annually. Then, in 1909, he moved to Waikīkī, to "Ocean View Court," a collection of cottages at 2189 Kūhiō Avenue. He remained there for 14 years. In 1905 he had married Mary Nelson. Their daughter, Elsie Lillian, was born in 1907. They were divorced, perhaps in 1923, for then he moved away, leaving behind at Ocean View Court "Mrs. Mary Ostergaard," who appears as a telephone subscriber in

FIG. 1 (*top*). Jens Ostergaard in his middle years. (AH photo.)

FIG. 2 (*bottom*). Uniformed motorman and conductor, unidentified acquaintances, and mule-cart driver. (Bishop Museum, Edgeworth Collection photo.)





that name from 1925 to 1928. She was married again (at age 39) to Alvin James Hiscox, then a marine, on 3 August 1923. (On the marriage license she used an acquired middle name, showing herself as Mary Mathias Ostergaard.)⁷

Elsie started at Punahou in September 1913, perhaps riding mornings with her father as he started work at the same location. She was never a scholarship or hardship student but paid fees of \$16 to \$18 twice a year. A member of the class of 1925, she quit school after her sophomore year, 1923, perhaps to marry. Punahou records show that she married Frederick C. Haub, who died.⁸ She married Christopher Waite in 1929. In the next two decades Elsie and Christopher often lived with her father, or he with them.

In 1907 the legislature authorized the establishment of a "land grant" university. On Sunday, 12 May, the newly appointed regents met at "Punahou & Wilder . . . to inspect the various sites. . . . Interest centered on Highland Park and the Government land of Puahia." By mid September of 1908 the board had acquired about 43 acres "for a campus in one of the most beautiful valleys in the suburbs of Honolulu. . . ." So wrote the president, John W. Gilmore. The first classroom building, Hawai'i Hall, was ready for use in 1912.⁹

The suburban College Hills immediately benefitted. The trolley line turned from Kamehameha onto O'ahu Avenue almost at Maile Way, a major entrance to the university grounds. Professors now sought residence along both streets and the adjacent Vancouver Drive (which would become University Avenue). A few lived in the "Village," along East Mānoa Road. All would ride the Mānoa trolley for the first segment of a trip to town or Waikīkī.

By 1917 Arthur Dean, new president, and Arthur Keller, an engineering professor, lived on the street *makai* of Kamehameha, Lanihuli. Edgar Wood, principal of the Normal School, was on Kamehameha, and also Charles Edmondson, then assistant professor of Zoology, who joined with Dean in taking special notice of Ostergaard, who seemed a rare discovery, perhaps a precious metal.

In 1920 Ostergaard became a laboratory assistant to Professor Edmondson (of his same age). Zoology classes were held in the Cooke Marine Laboratory at 2727 Kalākaua Avenue, behind the Waikīkī Aquarium. He also enrolled in the beginning zoology course (grades of 87 and 92). In 1921-1922 he took a junior level zoology course

FIG. 3. Jens Ostergard in 1954, holding his oil landscape of Manoa Valley. (HSB photo.)

course (grade 92) and beginning physiology (grade 82). In his third year he took a senior level zoology course (grade of 90). In 1923-1924 and in one semester of 1924-1925 he refreshed his French. He completed his college career with German and more zoology in 1927-1928. Zoology was moved to the Mānoa campus when Dean Hall was completed in 1929.¹⁰

As a university teacher with no academic degree, his rank was always shadowy. From 1921 to 1926 he listed himself in the city directory as an instructor. Then was there some complaint? During 1927-1932 he retreated to list himself only as an assistant. Finally, in 1933 he appeared as an "assistant instructor" and thereafter as instructor. The University catalogue so lists him.

One of his students in zoology thought him "most considerate and helpful to all the students. The most difficult part . . . was the drawing of each part. . . . He had an eye for detail and would say so." Another student remembers his politeness, while being a demanding instructor, but says he could be a bit confusing when he dealt with his specialty, sea shells. He could never master the "sh" sibilant: "cells" and "shells" sounded the same to him.

Professor Harold St. John remembers him as a "quiet, self-contained, pleasant man. I soon learned that . . . he was lucid and precise in his lecturing and tireless in helping his students. He was by far the most popular teacher in the Zoology Department." Professor Willard Wilson saw him as a "charming, literal-minded man." In the first year of World War II University staff were told to report at regular intervals what they were doing for the war effort. On 13 March 1942 he wrote a careful memo to Mrs. Hoffman, then President Gregg M. Sinclair's secretary: "I have done nothing for defense during the past week."

In 1933 he got a leave of absence without pay for the fall term to "carry on advanced studies in Europe." (This would be his first return home in more than three decades.) Spencer Tinker, who had been a teaching fellow in zoology, was appointed an acting instructor in his place.¹¹

He had already made an important field trip for the Bishop Museum, to Tonga and Fiji in 1926. For a time he was in charge of the Bishop Museum malacological collection.¹²

His publications began in 1920 with the description of a new species of cowry, *Cypraea pacifica*.¹³ This was followed in 1928 by a Bishop Museum three-page publication, "Fossil Marine Mollusks of Oahu."¹⁴ Among these is *Cypraea ostergaardi*, formerly his *C. pacifica*,

the specimen of which he probably collected from the fill at Sand Island. Reginald P. Gage II, his student and malacological colleague, writes:

Cypraea were a great interest to Ostergaard. Jens discovered the species, which is now instantly recognizable to all students of Hawaiian conchology and worldwide cowry collectors as *ostergaardi*. The species has been described three times: first as *C. pacifica* in 1920 by Ostergaard, second as *C. ostergaardi* in 1921 by Dall (the name *pacifica* being preoccupied by species within the *Cypraea* family) and again by Ostergaard as *C. alleni* in 1950.¹⁵

("C. *alleni*" was named after his daughter Elsie Lillian.)

His report on the Tonga expedition, also published by the Bishop Museum,¹⁶ was 59 pages long and the first scholarly study of fossil shells in the South Pacific; it remains an important paper. In 1937 he published on the distribution of fossil oysters in Hawai'i,¹⁷ and in 1939 his third Bishop Museum publication appeared, a ten-page article, "Reports on Fossil Mollusca of Molokai and Maui."¹⁸

His remaining publications followed his 1943 retirement. In 1950 appeared a 30-page article "Spawning and Development of Some Hawaiian Marine Gastropods," in *Pacific Science*.¹⁹ A second article appeared in *Pacific Science* in 1955, "Some Opisthobranchiate Mollusca from Hawaii".²⁰ It has many of his drawings and a color plate. A final scholarly note was published in the *Hawaiian Shell News* in 1960 on the distribution of *Strombus ostergaardi*.²¹ A number of his short unpublished papers still circulate among malacologists.

He could also do popular writing. The *Honolulu Star Bulletin* on 26 March 1940 carried a short news item from Ostergaard, who suggested that Hawai'i had once had a much warmer, a tropical climate. His "Marine Mollusks in the Hawaiian Islands," appeared in *Paradise of the Pacific* in 1950.²²

His teaching in the 1920s and 1930s helped a number of future MDs go from the University to medical school. Mr. Tinker writes that he was "a very good mammalian anatomist and invertebrate zoologist." His course in anatomy had been rigorous and famous. (Tinker took it while himself a faculty member.) Ostergaard brought in boxes of shiny bones of a cat, one for each student. (Had he boiled them clean himself?) This was a laboratory course, with a text but without any drawings. The students had to learn to identify each bone and to tell where it fitted into the feline skeletal system and what its function was. The final examination was more of the same: intense identification. It was a memorable cat.²³

In June 1943 Ostergaard became 65; retirement was automatic. When the University of Hawai'i had obtained a retirement system in 1929, the faculty had the option of not joining. Ostergaard, then not quite an instructor, could not afford the monthly deduction. He made an unfortunate choice. He had always been prudent and frugal. He never owned a house or an auto. He walked everywhere. Suddenly he was without any income. A friend, Lloyd Killam, himself retired, had Pacific Laundry (which he owned) establish a "dinky laundry collection station on the mauka side of Beretania and Makiki streets for only one purpose—to insert Ostergaard into the social security system." (Since he would live to be 91, the benefits were significant.) At this "station" he coached several students seeking scholastic uplift.²⁴

He had given the university 23 years of the prime of his life. At Commencement on Tuesday, 15 June 1943, he received an honorary Master of Science degree. President Sinclair read out: "Member of the instructional staff for 23 years; self-made man who supplemented his meager formal scholastic training by independent study and hard work. Ardent student of natural history, author of works of merit in the field of molluscs, earnest and efficient instructor, esteemed by students and colleagues alike."

Honorary degrees were awarded to several others: Mary Dillingham Frear; John N. S. Williams (a research chemist, in canec), who had retired in 1931; Frank Dillingham, who had joined the university in a primal time, 1909; and to the now-retiring colleague who had helped discover Ostergaard, Charles Edmondson.²⁵

On 27 May 1951 Evelyn Gage wrote for the *Advertiser* of Ostergaard's 50 years in Hawai'i: "On the occasion of his anniversary Mr. Ostergaard has received letters of tribute from many prominent Honoluluans, including physicians and scientists who studied zoology, mammalian anatomy and comparative anatomy of vertebrates under his direction at the University of Hawaii." He wrote out a reply to the reporter with care: "That is the thing I have done of which I am most proud. The fine response from my students and the tributes from them as premed students have been most gratifying."²⁶ Mrs. Gage mentions that he had applied for a Fulbright grant to Queensland for further research in molluscs. She tells of his interest in oil painting, carried on for ten years. A 1954 photo shows him holding a 1941 oil landscape²⁷ (fig. 3).

In 1953 one of his former students, Rep. O. Vincent Esposito, tried to get him a pension of \$100 a month. Word was circulating

that Ostergaard was at the age of 75 working as a laborer. (The city directory shows him living at the laundry.) The Territorial House Judiciary Committee of the 27th Legislature unanimously approved H.B. No. 1095:

Dr. Ostergaard devoted many years of meritorious service to the territorial government and was a leader in improving the academic status of certain scientific studies in the University of Hawaii. At present, he is without any source of income . . . the territorial government is prevented from granting him any remuneratory recognition for the outstanding services rendered. His age prevented him during active service to become a member of the territorial employees retirement system.

As we have noted, the last statement is not accurate; and hereafter the newspapers continued to honor him with a doctoral degree.)

Both papers supported the move, the *Advertiser* with an editorial captioned "A Pension That Should Be Granted."²⁸ The *Star-Bulletin* sympathetically reported the bill. It printed remarks that Ostergaard's friends had obtained from him (he had no telephone and thus, was almost immune to the attention of reporters):

In order to prepare for publication some marine zoological investigations which I have made during my years of teaching, I have had to deplete my savings, and I have no source of income, not even a pension. So in order to defray my living expenses, I am now obliged to take such employment as will consume all my time. . . .²⁹

Nevertheless, the House bill died in the Senate committee.

In 1954 he moved to California, where he lived with his daughter and son-in-law. And there he would be for another 15 years. He died at Mountain View on 11 August 1969. An obituary appeared in the *Honolulu Advertiser* on 26 August. It repeats the supposition that he had been working as a laborer, now called "manual," and it presumes that he had got a pension. The *Hawaiian Shell News* had an affectionate and laudatory notice in October.³⁰

The most eloquent tribute to Jens Ostergaard was the final paragraph of the *Honolulu Advertiser's* 1953 editorial:

[His] life in Hawaii is a textbook of living wisdom. An immigrant youth who travelled the American way; a student who by self-direction became a scholar and a professor; a teacher who in the process of education became a university Master; a patriarch who in the people's mahalo nui loa is by acclaim invested with an honorary doctor's status—in honoring Dr. Ostergaard we honor the Territory and ourselves.

NOTES

Unpublished materials not otherwise located are in the Mānoa History files at the Lyon Arboretum.

- ¹ The arrival date comes from the "50th anniversary" biographical article by Evelyn M. Gage, "J.M. Ostergaard Once Street Car Conductor/Noted Local Scientist Half Century in Hawaii," *HA*, 27 May 1951: 11; "Autobiographic Reflections," *Hawaiian Shell News*, April 1967: 8, and May 1967: 4 (Ostergaard was 89). His son-in-law, Christopher Waite, in a letter of 8 Dec. 1985, to the author, has furnished other details.
- ² "Autobiographic Reflections," May 1967: 4.
- ³ "Autobiographic Reflections," May 1967: 4; Evelyn Gage, "J.M. Ostergaard," 11.
- ⁴ The opening of the trolley lines was celebrated in *PCA*, 2 Sept. 1901: 1. Information concerning the trolleys is from Roy S. Melvin and Robert Ramsay, *Hawaiian Tramways*, San Marino, Calif.: Golden West Books, 1960); William Swanson, "Honolulu Rapid Transit Co., Its Start and Progress," *HAA*, 1935: 53-60; the five-year retrospective look in *PCA*, 2 July 1906: 96-97.
- ⁵ In 1906 the braided costume was changed to plain blue denim, *PCA*, 2 July 1906: 96.
- ⁶ These details and anecdotes about the Mānoa trolley come from interviews and correspondence with a number of Mānoa residents of the first decades of this century. Among these are: Montgomery Clark, Evelyn (Gage) Gerisch, Gertrude V. Gerrida, Louis Henke, Ronald Higgins, Laura Korn, Beatrice Krauss, Peggy Robb, Juliette Wentworth, and Margaret Young. (Miss Gerrida is the niece of Ostergaard, and as a "youngster rode with him on the streetcar many times.")
- ⁷ Information from city directories and telephone books at AH, the University of Hawai'i Hamilton Library, and from Gertrude Gerrida. Christopher Waite says Mrs. Ostergaard was Mary Nielson, "daughter of the manager of the Onomea sugar plantation."
- ⁸ Punahou information was obtained by Linda Wiig, Archivist.
- ⁹ U of Hawai'i Regents minutes 401-395 (numbered backwards); Arthur Dean, "Historical Sketch of the University of Hawaii," *University of Hawaii Occasional Papers* no. 5, 1927: 4; *PCA*, 4 May 1907: 1.
- ¹⁰ Faculty file, U of Hawai'i Archives. Other information is from interviews with Spencer Tinker, retired Professor of Zoology, who shared an office with Ostergaard from 1933 to 1935, and was for many years the director of the Waikiki Aquarium.
- ¹¹ Tinker recalls that he took to Europe "quite a sizeable collection of Hawaiian curios, including some koa bowls."
- ¹² Tinker, interview.
- ¹³ Jens Mathias Ostergaard, "A New *Cypraea* from Hawaii," *Nautilus* 33 (1920): 92.
- ¹⁴ Jens Mathias Ostergaard, "Fossil Marine Mollusks of Oahu," *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin* 51 (1928): 1-32.
- ¹⁵ Reginald P. Gage II, letter to author, 13 Nov. 1985.
- ¹⁶ Jens Mathias Ostergaard, "Recent and Fossil Marine Mollusca of Tongatabu," *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin* 131 (1935): 1-35.
- ¹⁷ Jens Mathias Ostergaard, "Distribution of Fossil Oysters in Hawaii," *Nautilus* 50 (1937): 88-89.
- ¹⁸ Jens Mathias Ostergaard, "Reports on Fossil Mollusca of Molokai and Maui," *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Occasional Papers* 15 (1939): 67-77.
- ¹⁹ Jens Mathias Ostergaard, "Spawning and Development of Some Hawaiian Marine Gastropods," *Pacific Science* 4 (1950): 75-115.

- ²⁰ Jens Mathias Ostergaard, "Some Opisthobranchiate Mollusca from Hawaii," *Pacific Science* 9 (1955): 109-136.
- ²¹ Jens Mathias Ostergaard, "Distribution of *Strombus ostergaardi* Pilsbry," *Hawaiian Shell News* 8 (1960): 3.
- ²² Jens Mathias Ostergaard, "Marine Mollusca of the Hawaiian Islands," *PP* 62 (1950): 42-43.
- ²³ Tinker, interview.
- ²⁴ Tinker, interview.
- ²⁵ *HA*, 11 June 1943: 5 and 11; *HSB*, 16 June 1943: 6.
- ²⁶ *HA*, 27 May 1951: 11.
- ²⁷ *HA*, 27 May 1951: 11. Son-in-law Waite writes that "he took up [oil] painting in the Thirties, nearly all landscapes and still life. He sold a number during the war years to defence workers. . . . I have about a dozen of his paintings. My daughter has a large very beautiful one of Bird of Paradise flowers."
- ²⁸ *HA*, 1 May 1953.
- ²⁹ *HSB*, 5 May 1953.
- ³⁰ *Hawaiian Shell News*, vol. 27, no. 10 (Oct. 1969): 8.

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- 1928 "Fossil Marine Mollusca of Oahu," *Bishop Museum Bulletin* 51.
- 1935 "Recent and Fossil Marine Mollusca of Tongatabu," *Bishop Museum Bulletin* 131.
- 1939 "Reports on Fossil Mollusca of Molokai and Maui," *Bishop Museum Occasional Paper*.
- 1950 "Spawning and Development of Some Hawaiian Gastropods, *Pacific Science*, 4, no. 2: 75-115.
- 1955 "Some Opisthobranchiate Mollusca from Hawaii," *Pacific Science*, 9, no. 2: 109-36.